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*Jack Anderson
And Dale Van Atta*

Nuclear Exports To China?

Congress should take a long, hard look at the agreement the White House is eager to push through allowing export of nuclear reactors and uranium fuel to China. The agreement would seriously hamstring U.S. efforts to make sure the technology and material are not diverted to military use.

The Reagan administration's reluctance to share its own misgivings lends weight to critics' suspicions that the deal is an elaborate bailout of the ailing U.S. nuclear-power industry.

Not the least of the administration's private concerns is the aid that China has been giving Pakistan in developing its nuclear program. China's foreign ministry insists that this will "serve only peaceful purposes."

That's not what our intelligence sources say. As we first reported Sept. 23, China's technology assistance to Pakistan has given that country the capability of exploding a nuclear device within weeks and of collecting a modest nuclear arsenal within two years.

Chinese scientists have been studying the Pakistani centrifuge technique of producing nuclear material. And the Chinese have given Pakistan information on a Hiroshima-size bomb that Peking has successfully tested.

There's more alarming evidence. Here's what we've learned:

- A "seismic event" occurred in May 1983, in a desert region of China's Xingiang Province, just north of the Lop Nor nuclear test range. Intelligence reports suggest that the rumbling was a secret nuclear test, and that a high-level Pakistani official attended the event.

- Intelligence reports indicate that the Chinese have agreed to provide Iran with nuclear technology, once the agreement with the United States is signed. Ostensibly, Iran wants only to complete its nuclear power plants left from the shah's regime. But Congress clearly would not want the Iranian government to get nuclear knowhow or material from the United States, directly or indirectly. Chinese officials have denied the reports, but Sen. Alan Cranston (D-Calif.) has accused the administration of suppressing intelligence information to avoid endangering the agreement with China.

- Within the administration, misgivings have been expressed. In a secret letter to the White House, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission raised questions about the agreement. What bothers the NRC is China's cooperation with nations such as South Africa, Pakistan and Argentina, which have refused to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

- The agreement itself is a sloppy piece of work. U.S. law requires that American officials be allowed free access to inspect the nuclear facilities of any country that buys nuclear technology from us. The agreement with Peking contains only a mushy commitment by the signatories to "mutually acceptable arrangements for exchanges of information and visits."

In addition, the standard U.S. veto right over the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel—which can be converted into weapons-grade nuclear material—is virtually non-existent in the agreement. This would make future agreements with other countries more difficult, since they would surely demand equal treatment.

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